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PP RUEHBW RUEHLN RUEHPD RUEHVK RUEHYG  
DE RUEHMO #1242/01 1231333  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 021333Z MAY 08  
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7904  
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE PRIORITY  
RUEHDX/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 001242

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E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [ELAB](#) [RS](#)  
SUBJECT: BLUE SKIES, BALLOONS AND BLATHER - MAY DAY IN  
RUSSIA

REF: A. MOSCOW 1192  
[1](#)B. ST. PETERSBURG 83

SUMMARY

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[1](#)1. (U) Under clear blue skies over most of the country, Russia celebrated the beginning of the spring season amid a cacophony of traditional labor-oriented messages coming from all political perspectives. The holiday, solely dedicated to labor during Soviet times, has become a celebration of spring, and an opportunity for political leaders to demonstrate their political mettle on issues working people and pensioners care about. This year's celebration was notable for United Russia co-opting the event for its own political purposes and the ugly intrusion of real working class economic issues into the celebration. While "provocateurs" and anarchists disrupted some events, the Kremlin's mostly hands off approach to the marchers helped avoid international condemnation in the days leading up to the May 7 inauguration of president-elect Medvedev. Turnout for events around the country was relatively low as most Russians opted to take advantage of a long holiday weekend and took to their dachas instead of taking to the streets. End Summary.

DAY OF SPRING AND LABOR

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[1](#)2. (U) The first of May, known as International Worker's Solidarity Day under the Soviet system, is now celebrated by Russians as the Day of Spring and Labor. It is an event intended to be celebrated with parades, concerts, food and drink. The holiday is observed from the 1st to the 3rd of May, so many Russians use it as an opportunity to get out of town and begin their traditional warm weather habit of going to summer cottages on the weekend. The holiday has not lost its origins as a day dedicated to working people. Nearly all political parties, with ruling-party United Russia leading the way, used the day to promote what they are doing on behalf of workers and retirees. State television reported that 1.5 million people participated in events around the country.

UNITED RUSSIA CO-OPTS DAY OF SPRING AND LABOR

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[1](#)3. (U) Befitting its near-total dominance of the political landscape, United Russia had the most visible presence during the holiday. In Moscow, the party joined with the Federation of Independent Professional Unions to promote its "Strategy -- 2020," and to reaffirm the need for wage increases to keep up with inflation.

[1](#)4. (U) The party claimed 25,000 people participated in their

Moscow March along Tverskaya, a major Moscow artery, although this figure was not substantiated in any reporting. Party leaders, including Chairman of the Duma International Affairs Committee Konstantin Kosachev, Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov and representatives of United Russia's youth group Molodaya Guardia spoke at the event.

15. (U) In Yekaterinburg, the holiday was a United Russia affair with bureaucrats, students and pensioners taking part. A total of 25,000 people were expected to participate in the party's rally but, according to consulate officers, only 10,000 showed up. The head of United Russia in Yekaterinburg and the head of the official trade unions led the rally. The Yekaterinburg holiday rally, which had typically been held near the Lenin monument, shifted venues and message. Eschewing any reference to the Bolshevik origins of the holiday, the participants extolled Putin and called for "decent work and decent salaries." A much smaller counter demonstration was held by members of the Communist Party and the now-defunct Pensioners' Party.

16. (U) The Communist party geared up its creaking party machine to celebrate its traditional role as advocate for labor and the working man, with rallies across Russia boasting the usual sea of red flags, senior citizens and strident speeches by the party leadership. In Moscow, party leader Gennadiy Zyuganov and his top lieutenants led a march and rally at Teatralnaya Square, adjacent to Red Square, which included an estimated four to five thousand participants. Based on reports of the party's press service, Zyuganov broke no new ground in his address to the crowd, blaming the Putin administration for the continuing drop in population, for the failure to invest in infrastructure, and even for forest fires that have been raging across parts of

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Russia in recent weeks. He lamented the condition of pensioners living on five thousand rubles a month, and complained that the government had not provided new equipment to the military. Zyuganov vilified the West, condemning NATO expansion into Ukraine and Georgia, the "split of the Serbian people" through recognition of Kosovo, and promised support to the Abkhaz in their conflict with the Georgian government. The party claimed a bevy of rallies throughout the country, with up to 10,000 participants in the party stronghold of Krasnodar and similarly strong showings in Rostov-on-Don, Belgorod and Novosibirsk.

17. (U) Just Russia used the occasion to demonstrate both its left-wing credentials (part of its on going effort to court Communist Party voters) and its problems with Moscow authorities (part of its attempt to demonstrate its status as a persecuted opposition party). The holiday provided the party its first opportunity to publicly display its new colors -- yellow and green. At its recent party congress (ref A), the party had abandoned the traditional red of socialist parties and adopted green in an effort to attach itself to the burgeoning ecological movement in Russia. The party claimed thousands of participants at its march and subsequent rally. Originally Just Russia planned a march down Tverskaya but city authorities moved the march route to the less central artery of Tsvetnoy Boulevard. Leaders decried this change and used it to bolster their claim that they are an opposition party, and therefore suffer the whims of Moscow authorities. Like the Communists, Just Russia decried the rate of inflation and called for increases in wages and pensions to compensate.

AUTHORITIES TOLERATE MOST POINTS OF VIEW

18. (U) The day's events were notable for the level of tolerance exhibited by law enforcement. While the usual large numbers of militia (more than 100,000 according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs) were present on streets throughout Russian cities as they would be for any large

gathering, their presence was less threatening and their mission appeared to be one of maintaining order, as opposed to preventing marches from taking place. An "Other Russia" contingent led by Garry Kasparov was allowed to march down Nevskiy Prospekt, the main avenue through central St. Petersburg unmolested by police, who also took no action against "provocateurs" who threw objects and otherwise taunted Other Russia participants during the march (ref B).

¶9. (U) Small groups of anarchists were detained throughout Moscow for participating in unsanctioned events. In addition, an altercation took place at a concert held at the Russian University of Friendship of Nations. The concert, at which there were 10,000-15,000 spectators had to be stopped when a fight broke out and law enforcement intervened and seized weapons. There were detentions in other cities as well. According to news reports, activists with ties to Yabloko and the Communist Party, who chanted "Putin, you're fired," were detained in Saratov.

¶10. (U) The Movement Against Illegal Immigration marched in central Moscow under banners calling for higher wages, as well as their xenophobic standbys: Russia for Russians, Moscow for Russians, and calls for the expulsion of illegal immigrants and reduced quotas for foreign workers. According to newspaper reports prior to May 1, the march was sanctioned by Moscow's mayor. Marches by the movement were planned for other cities including Volgograd.

COMMENT

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¶11. (SBU) With only a handful of days to go before Dmitriy Medvedev becomes president, the Kremlin's low-key approach to the range of demonstrators helped avoid another spate of international criticism of what has been its policy of severely constraining the right to free assembly and political speech. Most Russians were focused more on the warm weather and long holiday weekend than on the relatively minor political displays taking place on the streets.

BURNS